

5 December 1968

ARMY and DOS review(s) completed.

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Comments on the Proposed US Action in the Demilitarized Zone

Summary

1. The political costs of moving US forces up to the Ben Hai River would appear to outweigh whatever tactical military advantages might be gained. In large part the political difficulties would flow from the fact that it would be hard to demonstrate to the world at large that there has been a buildup of Communist forces in or just north of the DMZ sufficient to pose a substantially increased threat to the lives of our troops. The Communists are, of course, making some use of the DMZ and have some troops therein. They can plausibly and legitimately be taxed, both privately and publicly, with cheating on the "understandings" which led President Johnson to stop all bombing of North Vietnam. Nonetheless, though the Communists are behaving in a provocative fashion, the actual extent of their provocations would not yet appear to warrant retaliation as massive as a US occupation of the southern half of the DMZ.

The Facts of the Current Situation

2. There is no firm evidence that the North Vietnamese have dramatically increased the size of their combat forces in the DMZ since 1 November.

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Small reconnaissance units, however, are still operating within the DMZ and just south of it and small mortar squads are also known to be operating just within the southern boundary of the zone.

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4. It is also worth noting that the largest enemy unit detected within the DMZ since 1 November has been a platoon, approximately 30 men. Two men captured in contact with platoon-size units on allied sweeps into the DMZ stated that they were from recon companies of the 138th Regiment. A third prisoner may have been from the 27th Regiment which operates just below the DMZ.

5. A further problem which would arise in demonstrating a substantial threat to our forces arises from the fact that although some 480 "incidents" have been reported by MACV in the DMZ since 1 November, none of these involved significant enemy troop movements. The great majority involved observations of enemy bunkers or the movement of very small groups of personnel -- two or three in each group. Moreover, many of these people appeared to be unarmed.

6. There have been only 13 incidents of enemy mortar firing from within the DMZ at allied positions. Total US casualties from these shellings have been light. ARVN casualties have also been light. In addition, although the enemy has regularly fired at US aerial reconnaissance aircraft over the DMZ, to date, no US aircraft have been lost to this firing from within the DMZ.

Political and other Considerations

7. The enemy has not significantly increased the volume of supplies moving to the DMZ.

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[redacted] The North Vietnamese, however, have been quick to capitalize on the opportunities presented by the bombing halt to move their logistical bases southward from the 19th Parallel to Vinh, Quang Khe, and Dong Hoi. The enemy has been quick to restore rail service, repair roads and bridges, and build additional storage and transshipment areas in the area now freed from bombing. Large North Vietnam coastal ships of up to 2,500 tons are moving supplies directly from Haiphong to Quang Khe. There is no doubt that more supplies, including civilian goods, are moving into the southern panhandle than ever before.

8. The fact that we have not even begun the formal second round talks adds a further dimension to the political difficulties we would face in justifying US troop deployment up to the Ben Hai. Since we have all along taken the initiative in demanding that the neutral character of the DMZ be restored, it will look bad if we unilaterally put troops on the southern bank of the DMZ before we have even attempted to firm up the DMZ portion of the agreement in formal talks.

9. The question is also bound to come up as to whether placing our troops right at the Ben Hai will actually reduce the threat to their lives. At present, the only imminent threat to our men comes from mortar and artillery fire. This threat will not be reduced by putting our forward elements right on the Ben Hai. The threat to our aerial reconnaissance pilots flying over the northern portion of the DMZ will also not be reduced by such an action on our part.

10. There is a strong possibility, furthermore, that the Communists would mount new military operations of their own in reaction to a US move into the DMZ. These might include redeployment of additional major combat units into the southern part of North Vietnam and perhaps into the northern half of the DMZ as well. A step up in Communist military action in South Vietnam probably would occur. Shellings of urban centers, including major cities, might well be conducted as part of a new offensive effort.

11. Given this situation, unilateral US occupation of the southern part of the DMZ, would solve few current problems and almost certainly ~~locate~~ ^{create} a number of new ones. If it is judged, nevertheless, that such action must be taken, it might be better to follow up Ambassador Vance's

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4 December conversations with Colonel Lau with a proposal that a joint DMZ commission, composed of the DRV on one side and the US/GVN on the other, be created to patrol the DMZ. We would undertake to patrol the southern half up to the Ben Hai and they would do the same in the northern half. This approach has the advantage of making it easier to justify unilateral US action if the Communists reject our overtures.

12. Hanoi would probably conclude from a US move up to the Ben Hai that this administration is not serious about the Paris talks, that it is just marking time until 20 January, and that there is no possibility of even procedural progress prior to the new administration taking over.

13. Hanoi would probably not break off the talks on the basis of such a US move. The North Vietnamese seem to consider that their fundamental demand for a full bombing halt has been met, despite the limited defensive air strikes being conducted in connection with reconnaissance. Hanoi would certainly attempt to make propaganda capital out of any US intrusion into the DMZ, but Hanoi's basic line would probably be that US and Communist activities south of the Ben Hai River are matters to be discussed with the Liberation Front and thus need not be an obstacle at this stage of the Paris talks.

14. Finally, while we are not professional military planners, we believe any serious attempt to occupy the southern half of the DMZ which the Communists contest would require a large number of troops -- at least one full division, probably two or even more. Assuming no significant additional deployment of US forces to Vietnam, these troops would have to be provided out of resources already in-country. The progress now being made in the pacification field and the Phoenix program is materially aided by the fact that, for the moment, there are now available US forces for close support of pacification and anti-infrastructure operations. A major force deployment to the DMZ area would drastically curtail the forces available for pacification and Phoenix support missions. We believe there is much more political mileage to be made out of an effective pacification and anti-infrastructure effort than out of occupying the southern half of the DMZ.

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